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ABSTRACT

Among the advocates of the "Back to Basics" trend there seems to be little concensus as to what exactly constitutes the "basics." It is clear, however, that what most people mean by "basics" is mechanical skills, punctuation, spelling and grammar. The task of teachers of language is to foster an understanding of how language can be and has been used both to inspire and to enslave minds, and to lead students, to their own command of language in logic, writing, speaking, and evaluating the world in which they live. To guide students to a fair amount of mastery of the "basic" language skills would leave little time for other activites that may prepare them for mature, productive, and responsible citizenship. The trouble with minimum competency programs is that they deal only with those areas which can be measured by exam. They require spending a great deal of time and energy to find out what students cannot do, instead of what they can do. Rather than mechanical competencies, students should be taught essential competencies. They should be able to express themselves logically, analyze their successes and failures, apply the ideas and lessons of literature to their own lives, and protect themselves from the propaganda of advertizers and politicians. (HTH)

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WHOSE BASICS? WHOSE COMPETENCIES?

by Robert Squires

Surely, one of the most frustrating experiences we have all had repeatedly in the past ten years is trying to talk to people about "basics," sometimes even among ourselves. How often have we discussed "the basics" with someone, a parent, a reporter, a business person, or a member of a school board, only to discover eventually that each held an entirely different concept of what the basics are? Or worse, no definition at all? Recently a colleague was having a teacher-parent conference. She spent considerable time showing the parent how the boy's writing was deficient in logical organization and supportive detail, only to have the parent exclaim, "Oh, yes, I see what you mean. His handwriting is horrible. How can you read it?" Variations of that scenario must have been played hundreds of times in hundreds of places across this country in the past decade or two.

Those of us in the profession who announce loudly and defensively, "I never left the basics," add nothing to the confusion except more confusion. That virtuous pronouncement fails to define what the basics are. We may think we are all talking about the same things, but the fact is we aren't.

Some people, like John Simon, Thomas Middleton, Richard Mitchell, and the Gablers, know exactly what the basics are, although they do not agree about them. One of my more pleasant fantasies, in fact, is a symposium whose task it is to define the basics once and for all time, and whose members are the Gablers, John Simon, Edwin Newman, and Neil Postman.

One very large segment of the back to the basics forces has only a hazy notion of what those basics are. This group is, I think, prompted more by nostalgia for the good old days than by an informed analysis of what schools are trying to do. In a world that refuses to remain stable and predictable, even over night, such critics are searching for the solid foundation they believe readin', writin', and 'rithmetic used to guarantee to every child. One school board member of my

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acquaintance, who has a doctorate, by the way, but try not to hold that against him, recently said in public, "They don't teach grammar like we were taught." I entertained a number of possible responses and finally settled on sympathy for all of the gentleman's teachers. However, confronted by that sort of criticism or demand, just how are we to go about "returning" to teaching the "basic" grammar "like" he was taught?

Memory is a tricky thing, and these critics tend to forget the schoolmates who started dropping out in 8th grade because they couldn't cope, schoolmates whose counterparts are now with us in school until they make a shaky business of graduating. They also ignore the fact that the high school graduates in pre-World War II America who successfully competed in the job market and forged careers for themselves would today find employment nearly impossible with those 1940's diplomas. The fact is America's schools are doing a better job of educating more people than at any other time in our history.

A third segment of the back to basics forces, and perhaps the largest, simply has no idea at all of what the basics are, but, frustrated by apparent weaknesses in students and impressed by the rhetoric of those who think they do know what the basics are, they call loudly and insistently for a return to the basics. This is the most difficult group of all to deal with. Rational discussion is nearly impossible because there is nothing definite to seize on.

It is clear, however, that what most people, including those with the most widely syndicated voices, mean by "basics" is mechanical skills, those matters of punctuation, standard spelling, agreement, and subordination and coordination that the grammar and usage textbooks are full of quaint exercises on. I trust you noticed that I just ended a sentence with a preposition, a crime for which I shall probably receive a hundred years in Urbana, Illinois.

Language can be sublimely illuminating as in Shakespeare's greatest works. Language can be inspiring as Fulton Sheehan and Abraham Lincoln have shown. Language can be wittily irreverent as in Aristophanes and Ogden Nash. But language can also be the powerful tool of the propagandist, the petty demagogue, and the megalomaniac tyrant. As teachers of language, nursery through graduate school, our task is to foster an understanding of how language can be and has been used both to inspire and to enslave minds. And as language is the tool of both thought and communication, a second task is to lead students to their own command of language in logic, writing, speaking, listening, reading, criticizing, discussing, and examining and evaluating themselves and the world they live in. And let us not forget, as we try to accomplish these tasks, that the world they live in is not merely physical, but social, emotional, and spiritual as well.

The proper placement of commas and semi-colons and the correct use of there, their, and they're may be evidence of orderly, logical minds, but I doubt it; the mastery of such skills alone, without an appreciation of their place in effective communication, is, instead, evidence of superbly efficient, mindless programming. The sheep in George Orwell's Animal Farm were trained to recite "Four legs good, two legs bad," but that there was no mind involved is proven when they are easily retrained to recite "Four legs good, two legs better." Students who have mastered such "basics" as the difference between participles and gerunds and who can spot run-on sentences, including the two I just quoted from Orwell, may very well be defenseless against the clever use of language by advertisers, propagandists, and politicians who often say much less than they seem to. A recent vice-president of the United States had a superb command of language, including a great many elegant sixty-four dollar words, but he also had a curious deficiency in "basic" honesty and integrity.

I expect I could guide my ninth graders to a fair amount of mastery of the "basic" language skills I've mentioned and more. But if I were to do that, where would be the time for Animal Farm and Romeo and Juliet, for film and media analysis, for practice in organizing ideas and data in clear and logical exposition, for organizing and relating orally the results of research and discovery, for exploring the ways language is used by poets, politicians, and philosophers, and for a host of other activities that may prepare them for mature and productive, and responsible citizenship in the twenty-first century?

If we, educators, parents, test makers, and politicians, are really serious when we say that the central goal of education is to prepare young people for the future, then why don't we insist on substituting a minimal competency test on the pocket calculator for the current competency tests in mathematics? And shouldn't a competency test in reading include international pictographs? I belong to a generation that was drilled and drilled and drilled in "basic skills." I've been grateful that I finally mastered the multiplication tables, although I never did get the 11's and 12's; it has certainly saved me a lot of time, but did that mastery teach me to think logically or rationally, or critically? I think not, and now that I own a pocket calculator, my mastery of the tables seems a bit silly, if not redundant. Teaching for understanding of concepts and ideas and for problem solving is clearly more lasting and more important to the futures of students than teaching tables, rules, facts, and details.

I'm indebted to Dan Lindley of the University of Chicago for this neat turn of phrase. He said, "English teachers are concerned with the maximum of the human spirit, but we are now being told to teach the minimum."

Mechanics are certainly important in the total education of the whole child. They are important because they are a means to an end, clear and cogent communication; they are not the end itself. It has always seemed to me

hypocritical that a teacher could praise the style of Maugham or Steinbeck on Monday and on Tuesday crucify students for writing fragments and run-ons. We must find ways of leading students to judge for themselves when fragments and run-ons can be used clearly and forcefully and when they are a deterrent to effective communication. A language arts curriculum, at any level, that ignores mechanics is just as unfair to students as one that contains nothing else.

The trouble with minimum competency programs and exams is that they are minimum and they deal only with those areas that can be measured by an exam. They penalize the very best students as much as the weaker ones. To the best students, they convey the message that only mechanical skills are important and necessary. To the weakest students they say, "You're dumb! Nobody wants you around. Why don't you drop dead?" I worry about all students, but I worry most about those with the fewest defenses of their own and with the fewest champions. Students who are denied diplomas on the basis of a minimum competency test don't feel good about their school, their society, or themselves. I'm afraid they will become discouraged, and instead of staying in school to learn what they can learn, they will drop out and become another kind of problem for some other agency of government to handle.

Minimum competency testing is essentially negative; it forces us to spend so much of our time and energy finding out what kids can't do that we have none left over for finding out what the[illegible]n do. Let me illustrate that point by citing the American violinist Itzhak Perlman. He says, "Instead of worrying about unnecessary limitations, my parents were concerned that I had a normal childhood." He voices the same concern when he visits hospitals for handicapped children. He tells parents to look for the real limiations, to find out what a child can do.

I have a recurring, and very favorite fantasy. It's interesting that my fantasy never begins with a letter in elegant prose; it begins, rather, with a telephone call from the White House, or the Ford Foundation, or the Secretary-General of the United Nations, or the Chancellor of Syracuse University inviting me to write a minimal competency test. The precise nature of the test varies from fantasy to fantasy, and it has a lot to do with what I've read in the morning paper. Sometimes it's a minimum competency test in honesty to be given to all candidates; sometimes it's a minimum competency test in common sense for enginerrs in nuclear power plants; and sometimes it's a minimum competency test in educational philosophy for school board members.

Am I naive? Of course! But not more naive than the minimum competency advocates. How can they possibly believe that a student's passing a minimum competency exam on some date prior to graduation means the student is competent for life? I know veterinarians and telephone company executives who haven't used the language correctly in thirty years, but I'm willing to be generous and believe that they might once have done so.

Indeed, now that minimum competency testing has been around for some time, there is beginning to be considerable evidence that emphasis on skills isolated from significant context has little lasting effect. In Bakersfield, California, students who passed all 15 math tests in 1976 and 1977 were retested in 1978. Only 10% passed them all again, and the average student passed 10 of the 15. In fact, there is no data to support the claim that minimum competency programs and minimum competency tests are improving students' achievement.

At a recent basic skills conference sponsored by the National Institute of Education, Roger Shuy of Georgetown University argued that breaking down language learning into small sub-skills for teaching purposes actually complicates the challenge to the learner. The idea that teachers can help children learn "by

taking natural language apart and by cutting it into little pieces" runs counter to research showing learning is a complex task which occurs at several levels simultaneously. Furthermore, it removes a vital motivating factor from language learning. "Good language learners begin with a need to get something done with language, and move gradually toward the forms."

Multiple-choice question!

Schools should be:

a. Babysitting services.

b. Factories that turn out robots able to place apostrophes and commas correctly 100% of the time.

c. Social institutions that are part of the process that contributes to each individual's maturation, responsibility, self-sufficiency, and sense of personal worth.

Well, if we language arts teachers want to continue to live with ourselves, the correct answer is C. But that isn't everybody's correct answer.

For many in our society, the correct answer is B. Two years ago, James Bonnell, president of the Anaheim, California, school board, said about a textbook list that the board had established, "The only effort to restrict comes from the content of basic grammar classes. If they teach grammar properly, they will have no need for further books, nor will they have time for them." NCTE's Conference on English Education is meeting this coming spring in Anaheim. I hope they give Mr. Bonnell free registration.

In her inaugural address in November 1978, NCTE President Yetta Goodman said this: "The Back to Basics forces want to control the learning and the thinking of young people through control of our teaching. If schools' total energies go into minimum competencies, then there is little need to worry about a growing body of informed, literate adults who question what they hear and

what they read, who become actively involved in the major issues of a democracy."

In an article for the New York Times, Donald Ryan, professor of English at Pace University and president of the White Plains, New York, school board, charged the New York minimum competency exam with fostering elitism. He said the exam "requires a proficiency in skills exceeding those needed by a high percentage of Americans who are considered competent in their work and who seldom, if ever, need to do some of the types of reading, writing and math the exam calls for." In noting that the Regents have eliminated the civics and citizenship portion of the exam, Ryan also said, "Such an omission is curious indeed, for it dismisses the crucial role of education in preparing young people to be enlightened and responsible citizens. It is no exaggeration to say that if enough students are not competent in these areas, their competence in the skill areas may ultimately not matter very much."

In Edward Albee's The American Dream, one of his characters, a Mrs. Barker, describes herself in a marvelously ambiguous way as a "professional woman." At one point in the play Mommy says to Mrs. Barker, "Are you sure you're comfortable? Won't you take off your dress?" Mrs. Barker answers, "I don't mind if I do." And she does, indeed, take off her dress. Mommy then says, "There. You must feel a great deal more comfortable." And Mrs. Barker replies, "Well, I certainly look a great deal more comfortable."

Albee can be interpreted many ways, but I take the symbolism of that action to mean that for the moment Mrs. Barker is shedding the "professional" part of her title and becoming simply "woman."

I urge you now to perform a similar metaphorical disrobing. Shed, for the moment, the "English" or "language arts" part of your title, and become pure "teacher." Do you feel suddenly naked and terribly vulnerable? I do! When we are asked what we teach, what do we answer? We say "English." Why don't we

ever say "children"? I suppose because the operative word in the question is "what" and children are not whats but whos.

I've asked you to disrobe by shedding your "English" label. You may not "feel a great deal more comfortable," but you "certainly look a great deal more comfortable." There is suddenly a lot less distance between you and your students. You have become learners together.

But what are the implications for us in our "English" and "language arts" classrooms day after tomorrow? Clearly, we must reject the president of Anaheim's school board and any 19th c[illegible]ry curriculum guide that's imposed on us. But what do we do?

Well, we listen to our students, we assess their needs and desires and limitations, and their ways of learning, and then we respond with activities that will help them and us learn and grow. And we try to give them survival skills, or competencies, if you like. The complication is that every child needs different ones, and most of the time we can't foresee what they'll be.

And now I'm going to put my dress back on and become again not just a teacher, but an English teacher. And I realize now that once having taken it off I am, as an English teacher, more concerned about the technical skills, the integrity, and the human decency of my television repairperson than I am about the correctness of his or her language. His or her language may offend my ear for a moment, but his or her shoddy labor or dishonesty in billing would offend me far more.

Those who would impose a rigid set of competencies on our teaching would certainly make our lives easier, but I can't accept that they would make the lives of those we teach better.

The educational motto of the state of New York is "Let each become all that he is capable of becoming." Please forgive the sexist language; that motto was written over a hundred years ago. Do you realize what New York's competency

tests may do to that motto. We may have to rewrite it to read, "Let each become all that he or she is capable of being except the dummies who can't balance a checkbook, or write a paragraph about bicycle safety, or read and understand a dull paragraph about bridge construction."

The question is not whether we want our students to be competent. Of course we do. The question is, competent to do what?

What are the essential competencies I want my students to have?

I want them to be able to express themselves honestly, logically, clearly, and feelingly about what's important to them and to a variety of audiences.

I want them to be able to analyze their successes and their failures.

I want them to be able to apply the ideas, themes, and lessons of literature to their own lives and to the world they live in.

I want them to be able to recognize and to protect themselves against the propaganda techniques used by advertisers and the shameful and sham-full language of politicians.

I want them to be able to respond with delight to the play of language in a poem, or a play, or a speech.

I want them to become flexible to cope with inner and outer change and to tolerate ambiguity.

Can I, or anyone else, achieve all that? Of course not. Of course we can't achieve all we want to, but we can do much if we really listen to our hearts and to those of our students and don't allow ourselves to be distracted by over-emphasis on forms of correctness. We must never let ourselves forget that our students are writers only a few minutes each day, but they are, and will continue to be, human beings 24 hours each day.

Why have we reached a point where we must either quit teaching or accept "basics" and minimum competency testing as facts of life? Partly, I think, we are victims of our own rashness and lack of foresight. Or as Shakespeare might have put it, we have been hoist by our own petards. Minimum competency testing is with us partly because we responded too enthusiastically to Neil Postman and others who in the late 60's called for schools to become more open with more electives, more individualized instruction and greater tolerance of English dialects other than the one we call standard.

I do not for a moment blame Postman, and his recent seeming turnaround in Teaching as a Conservative Activity is not a turnabout at all. His was and is a highly intelligent and perceptive mind responding to the social and educational climates in this country. Then, as now, his was and is a call for schools to provide those educational opportunities and experiences that are missing in the other learning environments of students.

The problem was with those of us who threw out too many healthy babies with the dirty bath water until we reached a point a few years ago when in some schools, students, if they selected electives carefully, could graduate without ever receiving any instruction in composition, without ever studying the structure of the language, without ever analyzing a piece of literature, indeed without doing very much writing or reading at all. A few of us in the profession abdicated our responsibilities to our students, especially in composition, in the holy names of innovation and relevancy. And, ladies and gentlemen, what a few of us did is partly why all of us are stuck with minimum competency testing.

Of course, part of the reason is not our fault, or not directly our fault. The fact that large numbers of high school seniors regularly score in the 6 and 7 hundreds on SAT tests, win scholarships to prestigious universities, and are

highly qualified employees in their communities does not make headlines. But a single high school graduate in California sueing a school system because he cannot read creates such a strong backlash from frustrated taxpayers who cannot understand why they must continually pay more to educate increasingly fewer students, that legislatures react in the only way they know how, by imposing minimum competency testing on all the schools.

Part of the reason, too, is something over which teachers have almost no control. We have come, at the beginning of a new decade, to a social climate which makes it acceptable, perhaps laudatory, for parents to take their children out of school for a month-long skiing holiday in Switzerland, or to tack an extra two weeks onto the spring vacation for a family vacation in Florida, California, or Hawaii. In many inner city schools, the average student attends less than 20 percent of the time and almost never two days in a row. While not acceptable, such statistics are considered inevitable and are given a societal shrug of the shoulder. Instead of recognizing that if we don't have them in school we can't teach them, society blames the schools and imposes the panacea, the band aid, of basics and minimal competency testing.

If the basics that are being foisted on us and the competencies we are forced to teach are not those we would choose, then what do we do?

First, we read, endorse, adopt, and assimilate into our teaching the ESSENTIALS OF EDUCATION. The ESSENTIALS OF EDUCATION is a document written two years ago by a small group of educational leaders, among them Marjorie Farmer and Charlotte Brooks of NCTE and which now carries the endorsement of 18 national general and subject matter associations. Everything I have said tonight is really an expansion of the statement. It calls first of all for society "to reaffirm the value of a balanced education" and goes on to decry attempts "to limit the essentials to the 3 R's in a society that is highly technological and complex; to

define the essentials by what is tested at a time when tests are severely limited in what they can measure; and to reduce the essentials to a few skills when it is obvious that people use a combination of skills, knowledge, and feelings to come to terms with their world."

Second, having adopted the ESSENTIALS OF EDUCATION as a substitute for the basics, we must work to make competency tests irrelevant. Skills unused or rarely used become rusty with that disuse so that even students who have made a good beginning become what some people call incompetent if they are not continually given a rich variety of opportunities in observing, reading, writing, discussing, and thinking designed to broaden and deepen their command of language. Fortunately, there are a number of good programs that give me hope the profession can achieve this goal. New York City's WEDGE program, Writing Every Day Generates Excellence, for example, has the potential to effect a turn-around in the alleged incompetence of the products of our schools.

We must as a profession move, not back to the basics, but forward to the essentials.

I never trust my own words in conclusion. So, in conclusion I quote one of my predecessors. In 1974, when he was president of NCTE, Steve Dunning said, "We need to inform more of our work with humane intent: our talk and our questions, our poems and pantomime, kids writing and thinking about loneliness and compassion, hunger and fear, acting out dreams of hope, peace, and freedom. Let us orient English toward what's really important."